

*Is Art Dead? Does It Matter?*

In September 2014 I attended a panel discussion under the above title at Modern Art Oxford, wherein a panel of four discussed whether art might be considered “dead”, and why. The conclusion was that *yes*, art was dead — founded on the premise that (in particular) technological accessibility has threatened the ‘Fine’ in “Fine Art”. They concluded that because *labour*, technical fluency, and physical *skill* has been removed from ‘good’ creative practice due to digitalisation, art has been reduced to a lifeless practice. They believed this to be due to its flexibility, readiness, and expandability developing throughout all cultural contexts: the internet, digital art, the ease and accessibility of potential art modes (i.e. smart camera phones, Photoshop, artistic and explorative online social networking) (see figs 1, 2, and 3).<sup>1</sup> By “all cultural contexts” I mean those in which the “Fine Arts” *currently* and historically are occupied by very *certain* and *specific* cultural capacities: a global kyriarchy\* benefiting a privileged margin of society composed of white European men, largely complicit in (and in collaboration with) capitalist and non-diverse institutions (Harris, p. 9). The panel — artist Miriam Elia, director of Modern Art Oxford Paul Hobson, artist and tutor Sigrid Holmwood, and leader of the Stuckist movement Charles Thomson — did not address this cultural context or its relevance to art. This was a myopic approach, and this dissertation aims to correct their focus, honing in more accurately on its wider significance.

In the follow-up interview by ISIS magazine, Elia was asked what, then, was the point of making [her] art and what constituted ‘living’ art in a ‘dying’ art world. She replied: ‘a commentary; conceptual art that attacks conceptual art, making it look stupid and self-indulgent’.<sup>2</sup> This reasoning is exemplified in her book series ‘*We Go to the Gallery*’ (fig. 4) which aims to criticise the elite pretension of the art world through cutting parody. Satirising the form of the famous *Ladybird* children’s books, Elia comments on the ‘stupidity’ of contemporary art by juxtaposing it to the divergent perspectives of children and artists. By comparing contemporary art’s intellectual comprehension to that of a child’s Elia attributes simplicity, immaturity, and *amateurism* to contemporary artistic output, correlating a lack of necessary physical artistic skill to artistic ‘stupid[ity]’ — stupidity which she goes on, in the panel, to name the ultimate offender in discourse surrounding the ‘death’ of art. Her criticisms focus on the particular use of ‘non-artistic materials’<sup>3</sup> which she describes as anything non-physical (such as pencils, pens, paint; all her art work is illustrated through such mediums by hand). Her use of language — ‘non-artistic’ — encapsulates the degrading, dehumanising, and alienating nature of this discourse upon artists who are using non-physical means to create art, formulating a binary between actual-art and non-art with particular reference to illustration and

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<sup>1</sup> The ISIS (Panel discussion) — 3/3/14. Link to description & video: [<http://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/03/the-isis-presents-is-art-dead-and-does-it-matter-a-panel-discussion/>] Accessed 4/9/16.

<sup>2</sup> <http://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/03/because-god-is-dead-and-everything-is-sex-an-interview-with-miriam-elia/> Last accessed 3/2/2017.

<sup>3</sup> The ISIS (Panel discussion)

\*Kyriarchy: An intersectional extension of the idea of patriarchy beyond gender; encompassing sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, economic injustice, colonialism, militarism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, and other forms of dominating hierarchies in which the subordination of one person or group to another is internalised and institutionalised. (Stichele, Caroline Vander; Penner, Todd C. (2005). *Her Master's Tools?: Feminist And Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-critical Discourse*. BRILL. ISBN 9004130527. Retrieved 04.02.2017)

graphic design.<sup>4</sup> To reiterate, it is precisely these (non-)artists who she blames for the ‘death’ of art. What does it mean, then, to be a self-identified artist who makes (in Elia’s terms) ‘*non-artistic*’ art? Within the binary she establishes these artists must exist — so who are they? What are conditions under which physical skill is not necessary? Not *practical*? It is my aim to point out how this discourse around the sanctity of artistic physical skill is both symptomatic of and *conducive to* a capitalist art establishment, one which serves the interests of a systemic capitalist preoccupation with labour and professionalism and which actively disadvantages this particular kind of ‘non-artistic’ artist. Historically, this binary has been resolutely resisted as part of anti-capitalist artistic evolutions beginning as early as 1865 with Proudhon’s ‘*Du principe de l’art et de sa destination sociale*’, stating: “Authority in art is inadmissible. It is enough for any man to consult himself to be in a position to put forth a judgment on no matter what work of art.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, art’s survival is contingent on the subject reclaiming ownership from artistic/institutional authority and inserting oneself into art and vice versa — to ingrain the full scope of life into art. In this instance art is anything but dead: it is lived in. What’s more, if we accept that radical metamorphoses is what keeps art from stalling under a capitalist institution it becomes apparent that art’s survival *relies* on us demanding our right to live in it freely and without dictation. This remains relevant in contemporary radical art discourse — discourse which in the same vein as Proudhon, Duchamp, and Debord, will go on to shape the next art movements — exemplified here by the assertion of female artist and critic of colour Zarina Muhammad, in a defence of digital (‘non-artistic’) art making and sharing via the Internet: “I don’t hate galleries, my problem is that I think galleries hate me” ... “If [chain galleries] all digitised their collections for free I’d get on board. If I felt like this wasn’t the privatisation of cultural production or capitalist scum perpetuating a system of understanding art as intrinsically connected to money, I’d be <3ing it. But it is.”<sup>6</sup>

With this in consideration I aim to locate, analyse, and defend the aforementioned ‘non-artistic’ artists, insisting that art remains a living thing only so long as we allow it to be lived in without confinement; we must fully analyse the political implications of essentialising creativity precisely to keep it thriving. I aim to point out through sociopolitical analysis alongside relevant art theory that without this assertion, art remains in the same hands it always has done (white, male, capitalist hands) and it thus remains still — and that stillness is a more insidious, more real, kind of cultural and political death.

One could argue that Miriam’s analysis is what all historical art evolutions have also, to some degree, theorised and practiced upon. Is artistic ‘death’ not the very crux of artistic evolution in disguise? Artistic evolution is a rejection of tradition in search of some better, more coherent truth — whether the end be to “mak[e art] look stupid and self indulgent” or to point out that this end extends further, that it has the potential for resolution, to address its ‘self indulgence’ and move forward. It’s this line of thought which has driven me to address the issue further. Had the panel suggested that art wasn’t “dead” but evolving, the issue would be a different (and more historically precise) one. It is the use of this language — the notion that art

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Philip Gilbert Hamerton, “Proudhon as a Writer on Art” in *The Fortnightly Review* 4, no. 20 (March 15, 1866): p.153

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/why-i-hate-the-white-cube--zarina-rants>

was once a living thing, and now it is not, which requires proper critique within artistic and socio-political discourse. This language, applied to a discussion about what is essentially the impact of the artist (the ‘living’ subject behind art), locates accountability for the ‘death’ of art with the “insurgent” generation of artists who have replaced orthodox artist(s), the latter of whom the panel perceived as the ‘life’ of art. The ‘insurgent artist’ in this instance is the marginalised artist: the working class, the female, the non-white, the disabled artist. Through the digitalised sharing of art, via the Internet specifically, and by the rejection of creative labour, art has been diversified and made accessible to the full spectrum of artistic potentiality — something previously only afforded to white male intellectuals. This shift, toward a full and unapologetic demographic diversification, constitutes the distrust, by a repressive authoritative framework, of artistic evolution and which brings the notion of “death” (i.e. threat) to the table at all. Not that the content (or even intent) behind art has decreased in quality, but in fact that there is more of it created and shared by the underbelly of art history by uncontrollable means in some perceived coup d’etat of the institutional art canon.

With this in mind I’d suggest if we are to discuss any notion of art’s “dying” we should refer to it instead as attempted murder. I am also inclined to reframe and reanalyse *who* and *what* has attempted to murder it, *why*, and how to resuscitate it. I disagree with the principles voiced by the ISIS panel; the real “death” of art comes once positions of artistic authority (i.e art institutions, heads and directors of artistic platforms such as Paul Hobson) essentialise “good”, “bad”, or in fact “dead” art at all — usually because these positions of authority are held by white men, or at least those contextually implicated in a system run by and for the benefit of these men. I am clearly disinterested in the technicalities of how to herd “good” art practice back into elite and conventional settings (all ideas posed amongst the panel as ways to “rebirth” art), and whether or not artistic flexibility and evolution can be held accountable for its own “death”. I believe the very question itself and its frame of reference should be held accountable for any hypothesised killing, particularly to dispel the myth that art itself is in danger as opposed to art traditions and institutions being in danger, which is something different entirely.

Tracing a trajectory of constantly evolving art history, I will emphasise the unmatched role that marginalised artists have played within that trajectory and look at how these traditions continue into contemporary discourse (the advent of Internet artists following in that same trajectory), showing that the “death” of art is neither a new nor an especially threatening phenomenon. Instead it is one which needs deconstructing and effectively situating, explicitly describing the consequences of that same esoteric, alienating, and narrow-minded fine art culture as murderous unto its own good (Wolterstorff, p. 100). This begins to resolve the dilemma of evolving within a system which both relies on and is terrified of itself “dying”. Professor John Dewey was preoccupied with the stunting of artistic growth under a notion of an “esoteric fine art” world as early as 1934: “[we must] restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art, and every day events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute [actual] experience” (Dewey, p. 3). He refers both to the content *and the relevant mediums* any given artist chooses to (or is able to) use as intrinsic to this proposition of “actual experience”, and it is through this that we can deduct how artistic and cultural development repeatedly relies on our

ability to admit that for these reasons, no, art *cannot* be dead — that it is in fact dependent on radicalisation to live — and most urgently to the crux of this thesis, it *very much* matters.

Keeping in mind that art has resuscitated itself from past “deaths”, it is disingenuous for the panel to conclude that all ‘deaths’ are decisively *bad*, or constitute *endings*, so much as they are evolutions (Belting, pp. 27-8). Some relatively recent deaths within the arts during the 20th century include the rejection of notions surrounding the sanctity of physical labour, of traditional physical practice (and exhibition), and of art as a necessary physical form (graphic design, performance art, art cinema, etc.). The phenomenon of artistic expiration is not new (Thompson, p. 93), and has been widely accepted as a valuable contribution to the ongoing metamorphosis of cultural self-expression. Various historical examples, particularly regarding the role of marginalised artists reshaping art theory, demonstrate this: performance and body art during the 1970s challenged discourse on art authorship and medium (specifically within patriarchy and led by artists who were female – such as Carole Schneeman, Gina Pane, Yoko Ono, and Marina Abramovic (figs. 5-8)) and reanalysed bodies and their political potential within public/private arenas (Jones, p. 371). Additionally, many post-modernist artists from the late 60s to the present day characterised themselves by an anti-authoritarian nature and refusal of authority on any single definition of what art *should* be, including a skepticism or distrust toward grand narratives and ideologies (Duignan). Again, succeeding this were the feminist artists of the 1980s, such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and the Guerrilla Girls, who focussed more on psychoanalysis and Postmodern theory, examining the “lived experience” in a more intellectually removed manner than the *embodied* female experience that dominated the art of the 1970s. It is interesting to observe why the introduction of *digital technology* and the Internet is compromising and threatening this consensus in a way other movements seemingly haven’t, even though they target the same artistic and ideological dilemmas (Campanioni). I am interested in dissecting what this says about how art (or Art\*) functions now in late capitalism specifically, and most importantly for *whom* it functions, in order to contribute to the disruption of that transaction and encourage radical artistic evolution.

The language used by the ISIS, and other theorists like Arthur Danto who stated that art had “died in the 1960s”, the notion of artistic “death” implies violence against those who have been erased from art history and muzzles those artists who have found a space — *carved out* a space — to finally speak within this evolution (Danto, 1998). The subjects of this violence are usually female, non-white, disabled, and otherwise “outsider” artists. In particular, feminist art theory repeatedly outlines the significance of anonymised art practice as a means to access spaces which are otherwise denied to disrespected and non-platformed marginalised artists (Deepwell, p. 41), and it is alongside the genesis of Internet-and-art that this becomes most manifest.

There are clear examples of contemporary artists belonging to marginalised demographics following the trajectory of art history, often by recalling relevant movements and using those legacies to pave way to inspire new evolutions. One form of this phenomenon is led by artists who combine traditional radical art mediums *with* the new radical artistic potential of the digital and the Internet, referencing their radical predecessors with the acclaim they deserve — using performance *alongside* film, traditional “feminised” art

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\* Art with a capital ‘A’ denoting art made for and sold to the institutional elite or intellectual classes.

forms like textiles and embroidery *alongside* digital and electronic art, conceptual internet-based art *alongside* painting. This mis-match of mediums confuses the relevance of medium to its role in an “esteemed” Eurocentric canon of art history — if painting, a respected art form, accompanies digital enhancement or decoration, is it still a respected form? Michel Pred’s project *Pro-Choice* series exemplifies this; bags bought cheaply on eBay, carefully embroidered with electronic LED strips. Pred sought to draw attention to internet activism, art, and its power to impact real-life political dilemmas.

**FIG. 9**



**FIG. 10**



Textiles and embroidery have been gradually establishing themselves as feminist art forms since the mid 20th century with artists such as Ghada Amer, Orly Cogan, Louise Bourgeois, and more recently Tracey Emin. They have traditionally struggled against an established consensus determined to refute the

significance of traditionally perceived *female* labour as an art form but have nonetheless fought the case for “feminine” domesticity and inclusion into the institutional fine arts, gradually fostering a major breakthrough in art criticism and expanding art and craft-as-art movements as a fundamental facet of art history (Parker). It is now, because of these fore-thinkers, that we are beginning to see textiles showcased in public exhibitions (and retrospectives) and properly located within art history — exemplified by such transformations as the extension of the Tate Modern to encompass textiles and embroidery in their “TEXTILES AT THE TATE” collection, curated by Ann Coxon and opened in mid-2016. So although we are lagging 50 years or so behind on this front, if textiles are no longer as controversial as they seemingly once were<sup>8</sup>, and if we accept that we are indeed moving forward, then what is the justification behind the controversy surrounding institutionally embracing as equal forward-thinking, radical, political, perhaps ‘feminised’ mediums such as digitalisation, or the Internet? If this is something we have accustomed ourselves to before, surely we’d be happily able to do it again. Pred’s *Pro-Choice* series exemplifies this complicated interaction — her website makes the following statement regarding the project and the power of artistic activism directly *because of* modern technology: “the artist used this project as an expression of her frustration over the continuing and growing impediments to fair, safe and affordable access to birth control and other women's services in the United States. Thanks to social media and various media outlets, Pred managed to source and distribute roughly 24,000 birth control pills for her project.”<sup>9</sup>

Although many of these artists are venturing into unknown territory by using contested new mediums, the content remains much the same as it has done for artists who have advised other successful radical movements. These have not always necessarily belonged to or been pioneered by marginalised artists, which makes the fraught nature of the argument more curious. Consider the following image, anonymously submitted and featured on “<http://findingfemaleartists.tumblr.com/>” entitled *Man Is Jailed After Punching an £8 Million Monet Painting Pencil Case* (2014).

FIG. 11



<sup>8</sup> <http://www.textileartist.org/the-difficulties-of-defining-textile-art/> Accessed 4.3.2017.

<sup>9</sup> [http://aplus.com/a/michele-pred-pro-choice-accessories?no\\_monetization=true](http://aplus.com/a/michele-pred-pro-choice-accessories?no_monetization=true) Accessed 4.3.2017.

Compare this with the work of Marcel Duchamp, for instance *Fountain* (1917), created to expose and humiliate the superficial art world of the early 20th century. Its acclaim is best surmised by the Stuckists' in their 13 point manifesto: "5. Duchamp's work was a protest against the stale, unthinking artistic establishment of his day. 6. Today's art is anti-art. 7. Today's art is not art." (Childish & Thomson) Both *Fountain* and the pencil case make light of the absurdity of the *self-indulgent* "unthinking" hysteria of a capitalistic art world; they are made of one and the same radical potential. They strike at the pretensions of the art establishment, who sustain conventions and traditions over creativity. The pencil case, made from minimal material and with minimal physical skill, appropriates a motif of childhood and of learning — learning being the alternative to professionalism — and we might associate pencil cases with school or adolescence, for example (recall Miriam Elia's Ladybird books and the varying associations and connotations childishness and amateurism can have in fine art). However, coloured pens protrude from the pencil case, suggesting creativity and artistic productivity and so the prospect that the artist is unthinking or complicit (or "stupid" as Elia put it) is diminished. It is presented as a monetarily inexpensive but instead *context-rich* piece of work and it is predominantly this which exposes the hypocrisy of an art establishment that prioritises capital over content and even moreso capital over people, i.e the physical punishment upon a living person over the sanctity of institutionally esteemed artworks as though artworks aren't for the direct benefit and documentation of people and their lived lives. This is conceptually akin to *Fountain* which exists as part of a series of ready-mades by Duchamp which amongst many things addresses the lived life and every day object as intrinsic to artistic evolution, appropriating the mundane within an artistic setting. What distinguishes these insurgents — Duchamp and the anonymous Pencil Case submitter — is gender and time; the anonymous contributors have worked through the online sharing medium, possible only today by making a similar but updated (technologically enabled) statement to Duchamp, hence reducing their supposed legitimacy. Most saliently, where Duchamp was a recognised (and now esteemed) male artistic pioneer, the creators of the pencil case were sourced from a female-only art page on [tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/), a social networking platform mostly used by teenage girls, and so are presumably young women.

To recap: it would be inaccurate to propose that radical 20th century artistic developments were not contested during their dawn; I do not intend to argue that radical and disputed artistic progression is a new phenomenon, but instead respond to the ways in which the 21st century specifically is deemed as so threatening<sup>10</sup> particularly in an instance where we have seen most of these evolutions unfold before, albeit differently. The trajectory of history suggests we would become more and more willing to accept and trust in these metamorphoses but, for a variety of reasons, we (art establishments) on the whole aren't. For example, you often find that digital artists who utilise and manipulate traditional art modes through new mediums fall into this same category of "threatening" art, art which 'doesn't really count'. I am willing to argue that for the most part, this has nothing to do with labour and/or technical fluency, but in the most basic terms has everything to do with fragile white male chauvinism. Take, for example, internet painter Laura Callaghan — well known in internet art spheres for her intricate and vibrant paintings of young

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<sup>10</sup> The ISIS (Panel discussion)

women experiencing life. This, as I addressed earlier through the example of 1970s and 80s feminist artists, *is not a new artistic concept*. So why do her paintings fall under the category of “dead art” because they are digital? Visually, they have plenty in common with some of the most esteemed and established great painters of art history (take Henry Matisse’s *The Pink Studio* for example, or more contemporarily Grayson Perry’s *The Vanity of Small Differences*) — so where does the discrepancy lie? In the distrust of new art mediums and new untrusted artists to “handle” all the work that male artists have put in to get us where we are culturally, presumably. This framework determines that it is disrespectful to appropriate traditional technique with the intention to politically redefine the medium, and therefore the potential of art. But isn’t that exactly the power of it?

FIG. 12



FIG. 13



Another fantastic example of marginalised artists complying with, though redefining and re-utilising the trajectory of, esteemed art mediums is Lubaina Himid. One of the pioneers of the British Black Arts Movement, Himid first came to prominence in the 1980s when she began organising exhibitions of work by her peers whom she felt were under-represented in the contemporary art scene. Himid's work challenges the stereotypical depictions of black figures in art history, foregrounding the contribution of the African diaspora to Western culture<sup>11</sup>. One of the ways in which she does this is to paint political slogans and Black figures onto canvas (painting being another medium previously declared “over” by theorists like Douglas Crimp (Crimp, p. 69) — time and time again a phenomenon of art modes “dying” which present themselves as a futile and un-nuanced cultural theory). She displaces those figures *specifically* outside of frames, often refusing to follow regular exhibition order (i.e. having paintings half-draped on the floor). The power of these figures having “escaped” the traditional convention of the exhibition space makes for insightful and empowered political work, both within and without the context of the artistic environment. Himid's works are larger-than-life depictions of Black women, cut out and framed only by the empty wall space around their form, often either depicting walking alone, laughing together, or holding hands. Both the artistic content and context exemplify the significance of showcasing marginalised artists, and it is arguably also *through* the medium — one which she has manipulated by allowing her figures to transcend the frame, so to comment on the exclusion of marginalised artists in established art history — that helps this story to present itself so eloquently. To negate the relevance of evolving alongside mediums, then, negates the deeply oppressive political context behind art to begin with. It is for this reason among many that I continue to argue that expression through new and unfamiliar mediums is paramount to art's survival.

**FIG. 14**



<sup>11</sup> <https://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/event/lubaina-himid-invisible-strategies/> Accessed 4.2.17.

FIG. 15



FIG. 16



I propose in particular that digital technology has provided not only new modes of artistic expression that the 20th (or earlier) centuries did not, but for the first time it has provided an entirely new sphere in which art can exist; a brand new social enigma founded in universal accessibility, unbounded by borders or authority, and traversable through open-access Internet-based avenues (online anonymity, free art distribution, open-sourced learning opportunities, to provide a few examples) (Goriunova, p. 74). It is this openness, and consequent diversification, and *not in fact* the art, which is threatening — not especially to an art world, but to a broader framework of power and authority. As Annmarie Chandler points out, Internet art is actually, in fact, *rooted* in disparate artistic and *political* traditions and movements, ranging from Dada to Situationism (specifically relevant to Internet based art and communication, for example the constant creation upon recreation of Internet memes for absurdist comic value — comically represented by an absurdist t-shirt design, made using an online custom fashion website by another anonymous artist on the same page “<http://findingfemaleartists.tumblr.com/>” and shown in fig. 17), Fluxus (which has been called the first movement to consist mainly of women and artists of colour (O’Dell, p. 43)), happenings, conceptual art, kinetic art, performance art, video art, and telematic art (Chandler, Annmarie, & Neumark). To negate this, and worse to *blame* the death of itself on its shapeshifting, but altogether consistent,

motivation through art history is not only a dangerously ahistorical path to go down, but is to uphold a more general oppressive structural framework. The intentions behind a panel such as the ISIS' are to keep that status quo in place — perhaps not consciously for the explicit purpose of maintaining chauvinistic power, but at best to remain complicit in it. It is easy to remain complicit in these instances of hierarchical advantage as they are our only established narrative of what success looks like under a capitalist patriarchy. It is for this reason that these questions on a systemic level are so harmful, and for a moment I'd like to draw away from the particulars of the panel in order to suggest that whilst these conversations are still being had and supported by powerful art establishments more generally, non-complicit (marginalised) artists and cultural activists prove themselves as actually utterly *essential* to the lifeblood of creativity and of a sociocultural revolution.

If it is only the relative uncertainty of social/expressive development within the limitless political arena of the internet, and all its implicit *potential* to change ("kill") convention that has earthquaked the art world precisely because it *steals* power and hands it to those without any, then how do we begin to hone that power in order to use it to occupy artistic and cultural spaces effectively, and not just within our own radical circles? The Internet has supplanted artistic tradition in a radically innovative way, one which is seemingly frightening to fully embrace and confidently identify by a preexisting conservative kyriarchal establishment. Technological art power provides no clear end with which to understand and manage what formally and conventionally 'counts' as art. Most significantly, this compromises the concept of centralised control — and it precisely in this compromise that tradition senses its impending death, but that is not where art's "life" resides. It is here where power is distributed. The consequences of this permit an utterly non-formalised realm of diverse popular artistic knowledge and accessibility, no longer confined to traditional order, or institutional control (Goriunova, p. 25). For this reason I return to my initial statement regarding the real culprit of those trying to assassinate art: "the real "death" of art comes once positions of artistic authority essentialise 'good', 'bad', or in fact "dead" art into question at all"; by removing the opportunity to 'count' art and 'discount' other art, authority is abolished and life is restored to the full scope of artistic potentiality.

Additionally, one of the principal notions presented within the initial panel discussion was a preoccupation with the conviction that on the whole, *physical artistic labour* had been lost and it was primarily this which founded the case against art's survival. In terms of physical labour and art, it is more crucial to consider what the yearning toward *labour/art* actually reveals about *art/capitalism* more than it reveals about art itself (Boltanski & Chiapello, p. 101), particularly if we are to analyse and begin to move towards removing artistic expression from a kyriarchal framework built to smother (murder) diverse artistic evolution. In this instance, the removal of labour from art practice, and the emancipatory transition to the experience of *play* (Lyotard, p. 18), becomes not only relevant to radical artistic (and social) metamorphoses, but seminal to keeping itself *living* and not merely *surviving* in its pre-existing and comfortable institutional format and climate (which seems to be the only proposed alternative).

Art which does not require physical labour presents a radical take on art's political role in society and its potential to propose an alternative way of living, seeing and understanding one's role and capacity in a political, social, and artistic environment. Physical labour as an unnecessary requirement within a 21st

century art movement reflects a just drive toward a truly practical field of anti-capitalist (anti-labour) activism, and the rejection of that drive in turn reflects a rejection of anti-kyriarchal ethics. It is, admittedly, part of a *deliberate* effort to stifle this development on the behalf of a fundamentally capitalist status quo in order to keep art under control — and as such, is unsurprisingly referred to as a “death” in order to describe an unexpected diversion from one particular conventional artistic avenue onto a fork of new, radical, hopeful, influential avenues, none of which ever asked for (or rely on) *institutional permission*.

As touched upon, it is certainly not the case that female/non-western/non-white/disabled/queer/working class art and artistic genres and spaces do not or have not historically existed (or are not exhibited), but more the case that the contexts in which they do exist and exhibit respectively are biased toward an institution, or a field, which (purposefully) does not necessarily accomodate for them (Ferguson, p. 353). This is well observed through the very subfields “art” and, say, “female art” — or “artist” and “female artist” (to give one example) as a common cultural social dichotomy. The “othering” within the artistic canon, and the identity of the artist, is then seminal to the way art institutions do, and always have, functioned. So, by deduction, a condition built solely for the occupation of non-white non-middle-class non-male artists (for the first time in history) poses an intrinsic threat to an organised and bureaucratic art world (Buikema & Smelik, p. 96), and thus the terror of “death” is born.

However, that said, it does mean that the Internet is an almost custom-fit avenue for those artists to explore and make their own spaces. The White Pube is a collective of art critics who showcase the work of other likeminded artists and art writers online, and who work to critique and revolutionise the art world from within its most feared powerhouse – the Internet. Through the use of casual language and rejection of academic jargon, the White Pube goes further than satirising the art world (the ‘White Cube’) it isolates itself from. It is founded and founded and run by young non-white female artists whose writings deconstruct and serve artistic potentiality up to those who were never *institutionally* offered it. Page two of a cultural analysis, by White Pube writer Gabrielle de la Puente reads, under the title “Why I love the white pube”:

[when deciding whether a piece of art is good, I think] would my nan think this was proper cool? or jst showy? [...] work that adds to discourse is fine, it’s rich and appreciated, but when ppl walk in a gallery you gotta remember that they can’t read minds. ask yourself, is the piece also cool? entertaining? look amazzzin? do you wanna take a picture of it? does it make you feel things? it is scary? worth the visit? worth the ticket? [...] my family have made me up my game, and my standards. no bullshit or pretension. because It is not okay to sell a scrunched up piece of a4 for that much money [£70,000]. that is vile. and I think it is greedy to make hush hush artworks that only make sense to about 5 people. it’s like some shit in-joke that probably wouldn’t even be funny so I’m not gonna ask :/ [...] it is important because my voice is not supposed to be. and rather than giving in, embarrassed, sucking up to f i n e art academia, i am instead sticking by my working class, poor girl artistic guns and using some of my grant money to take up space on the internet

where I will be honest about the work that is cool, and the work which I think you are all pretending to like.<sup>12</sup>

If we are to accept that we need to keep art *living* and not merely *alive*, then I'd argue that it is actually ultimately *required* that we dismantle these institutions and embrace this artistic phenomenon as exactly the opposite of death: as birth (Stallabrass, p. 95). If we consider that the majority of working artists have been eliminated from art history and from the world's artistic stage, it becomes almost absurd to try to make the claim that any part of it has "died", *or could* ever die until it has been fully occupied by those who have historically been denied access to live within it (Buikema & Smelik, pp. 96-7). This hypothesis is a politically radical one and so in order to work, along with the adoption of fully accessible art disciplines must come the disregard of labour as artistic requirement too, and the rejection of institutional artistic approbation within gallery and museum environments. This is to welcome and celebrate art in all its diverse forms, from virtual reality gaming to forms of abstract Internet based guerrilla art. This also taps into philosophical discourse about what *counts as art* in the first place, and it is at this point I would suggest we remove the need for definition altogether to fully support a new anti-capitalist, anti-kyriarchical, anti-establishment, anti-elite, anti-discourse framework for artistic expression (Dobson & McGlynn), whereby on the whole, art exists for and to the ends of whoever wants it. For example and comparison of this within and out of the digital age: the White Pube purposefully showcases artists, art theories, and art writing who have no (or limited) institutional insight. Historically, this is closely comparable to Fluxus artists like Mieko Shiomi who incorporated "non-artists" into her work and presented her work entirely free from a gallery space in order to resist against a "butchering", corporate, potentially exploitative artistic intent (Merewether & Iezumi Hero, p. 13).

Miguel Angel Corzo points out in *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art*, that social and artistic developments must co-exist in order to develop both and either. He notes: "I cannot see how our approach to the arts will change, or how we will make significant strides beyond technology, unless we ourselves evolve. (Corzo, p. 75)" So, perhaps the most pressing question is not "is art dead?" but instead "do we want to murder art?" — a more contextually concise question which addresses a full analysis and acceptance of the context in which artistic spaces are currently permitted to exist to begin with, *who for* (and for who they are not), the ways we are complicit in this framework, and which acknowledges art as a cultural and political tool. For the most part, I believe the answer to this is likely no — as the despairing intonation of the panel suggested and will continue to do so in most artistic discussions, both from within and without of institutional power. And, as is the same with all activism and social metamorphoses, this requires action, solidarity, inflection, accountability, and the enthusiasm to nurse evolution. For art to escape a reductive institutional death grip, it must embrace the irreducible complexity of living.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/why-i-love-the-white-pube>. Last accessed 10.2.2017.

Fig. 1 VNS Matrix, *A Cyber Feminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991)

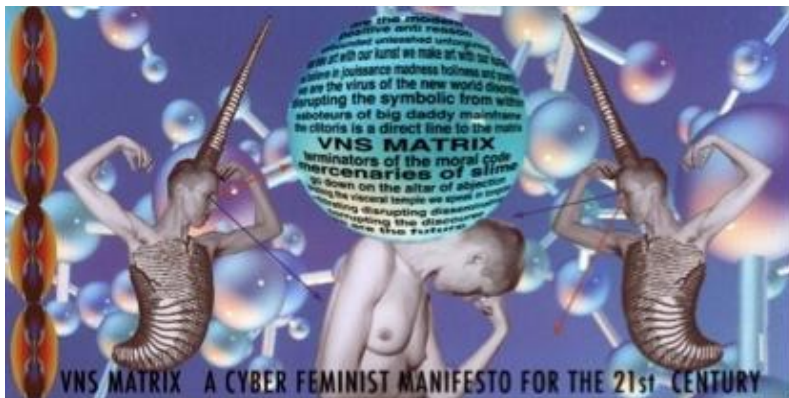


Fig. 2 Jennifer Chan, *P.A.U.L.* (2013)

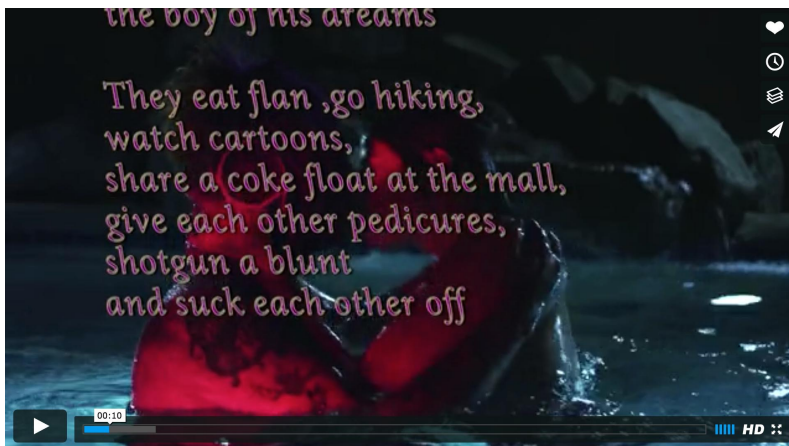


Fig. 3 Olia Lialina, *Net Art Generations* (2013)

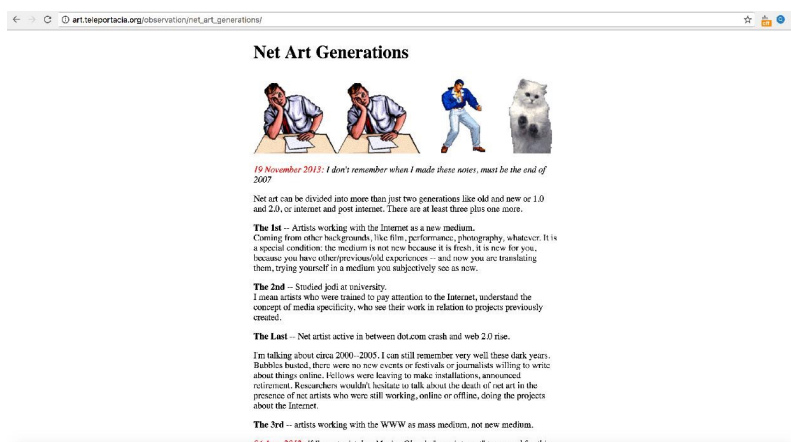


Fig. 4 Miriam Elia, *We Go to the Gallery* (2014)

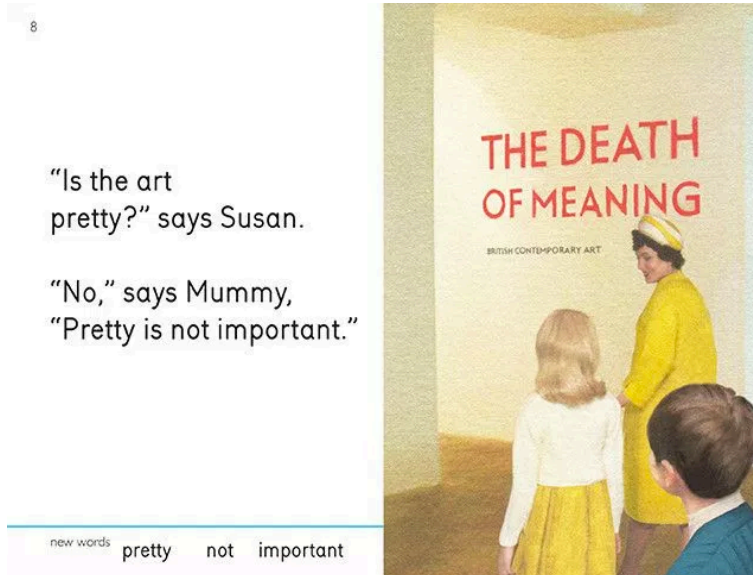


Fig. 5 Carolee Schneeman, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-76)

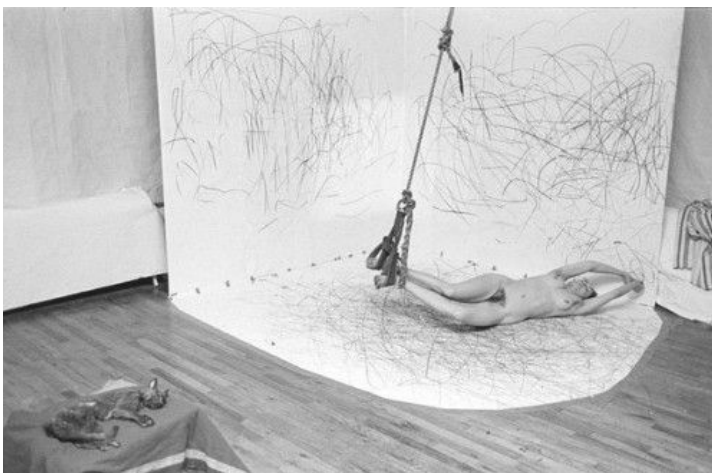


Fig. 6 Gina Pane, *azione sentimentale* (1974)

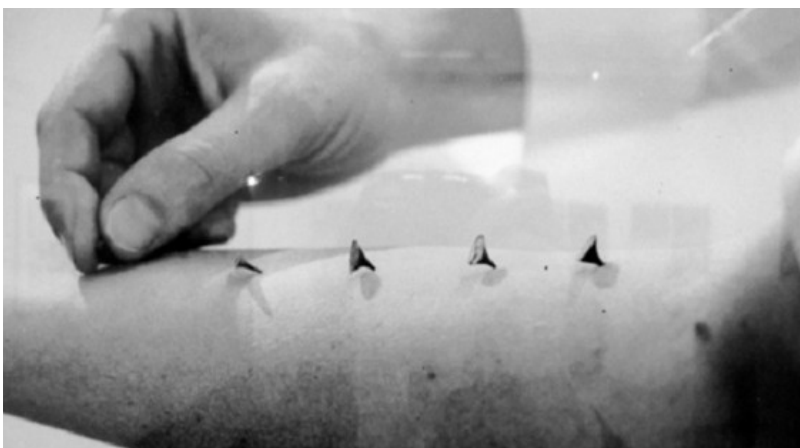


Fig. 7 Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* (1965)



Fig. 8 Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0* (1974)



Figs. 9 and 10 Michel Pred, *Pro-Choice* (2014)

Fig. 11 Anonymous submission, featured on “<http://findingfemaleartists.tumblr.com/>”

Fig. 12 Laura Callaghan, *Pick Me Up* (2015)

Fig. 13 Laura Callaghan, *Clio Peppiatt* (2014)

Fig. 14 Lubaina Himid, *Naming the Money* (2004)

Fig. 15 Lubaina Himid, *Carrot Piece* (1985)

Fig. 16 Lubaina Himid, *Freedom and Change* (1984)

Fig. 17



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## Links

- [http://aplus.com/a/michele-pred-pro-choice-accessories?no\\_monetization=true](http://aplus.com/a/michele-pred-pro-choice-accessories?no_monetization=true)
- The ISIS (Panel discussion) — 3/3/14. Link to description & video: [<http://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/03/the-isis-presents-is-art-dead-and-does-it-matter-a-panel-discussion/>]
- The ISIS (Publication) <http://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/03/because-god-is-dead-and-everything-is-sex-an-interview-with-miriam-elia/>

- <https://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/event/lubaina-himid-invisible-strategies/>
- <http://www.textileartist.org/the-difficulties-of-defining-textile-art/>
- <http://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/why-i-hate-the-white-cube--zarina-rants>
- [https://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/why-i-love-the-white-pube.](https://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/why-i-love-the-white-pube)